

Chapter VII : Planning and Lands

7.1 At the invitation of the Chairman, the Secretary for Planning and Lands (SPL) presented the proposed financial provisions for the programmes under his policy area with particular focus on the proposed strategies and measures to improve the safety of existing buildings and quality control of new building works. Details of SPL's presentation are set out in (Appendix V-6).

Control of advertisement signboards

7.2 On the progress of the Administration's proposal to develop a control scheme for advertisement signboards and the timetable for public consultation, the Director of Buildings (DB) affirmed that the Administration was determined to tackle the problem of abandoned and potentially dangerous advertisement signboards. He advised that currently, there were about 220 000 advertisement signboards in Hong Kong, of which about 10% were abandoned and 2% were potentially dangerous. In 1999, during the first round of public consultation on a proposal to develop a control scheme for advertisement signboards, the Administration had received diverse views on the proposal. Whilst there were suggestions of a registration system and the requirement of a deposit on registration of an advertisement signboard, views had been expressed that launching such a system might not be effective for control and regulatory purposes. Rather, it might lead to a situation whereby the owners of the signboards would neglect their duty to demolish the signboards after use. As a result, Government would then be held responsible for removing and repairing all registered signboards. DB remarked that the issue under discussion was rather complicated and had to be examined further by the Special Task Force on Building Safety and Preventive Maintenance set up under the Planning and Lands Bureau. The public would be consulted on the proposals in this respect later in the year.

Clearance of unauthorized building structures

7.3 Referring to the Administration's pledge to remove unauthorized building works on external walls of 1500 buildings and clear the illegal rooftop structures from 1200 single-staircase buildings within the next three years, Mr LEE Wing-tat enquired about the viability of the new targets and whether sufficient resources had been set aside for the related works. He also expressed concern about the rehousing arrangements for clearances which would have serious

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implication on the implementation programme. Apart from removal, he also called on the Administration to step up enforcement against the growth of illegal rooftop structures.

7.4 In reply, DB advised that a survey conducted in 1998 revealed that there were about 1200 single-staircase buildings having illegal rooftop structures. In view of the high risk of fire traps of these structures, the Administration had decided to provide additional resources to remove unauthorized building works on external walls of 1500 buildings and clear the illegal rooftop structures from 1200 single-staircase buildings within the next three years. The Buildings Department (BD) would deploy dedicated teams for the removal and clearance works. Meanwhile, it would also step up enforcement and related prosecution.

7.5 Regarding the rehousing arrangement for people affected by the operation, DB advised that the Housing Department (HD) had been informed of BD's clearance programme for illegal rooftop structures. In planning the clearance operations, BD would liaise closely with HD on the provision of accommodations for people affected by the operation and suitable arrangements would be made for eligible occupants.

7.6 As regards the maintenance of existing buildings, DB advised that the Administration was conducting a review of the voluntary Building Safety Inspection Scheme (BSIS) which was introduced in 1997, and the current intention was to introduce a statutory scheme on preventive maintenance of buildings to replace the BSIS. The premise of the new scheme was that the maintenance responsibility for buildings should rest with property owners. In operational terms, BD would carry out preliminary inspection of buildings. Where necessary, BD would issue orders to the concerned property owners requiring them to appoint an authorized person to carry out comprehensive investigation and necessary repairs. DB further advised that details of the new scheme were being worked out by the Special Task Force on Building Safety and Preventive Maintenance.

7.7 Ir Dr Raymond HO highlighted the present deficiency in tackling the problem of unauthorized building structures where different divisions in BD were responsible for the removal of different kinds of illegal structures erected on or attached to a building. He therefore enquired about the progress of the restructuring of the department to improve co-ordination and effectiveness of the existing system. DB advised that upon the completion of an organizational

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review, the Administration had reshuffled the work focus of the BD and come up with a proposal to re-organise the department to streamline and improve the delivery of service. The proposed re-organization was welcomed by the staff side and thus would be implemented in the next few months. Upon re-organization, a single division in BD would take charge of the work programmes on the removal of all unauthorized building structures found in a single building.

Processing and retrieval of building plans

7.8 Referring to a written reply that 21.9% of the new building plans submitted to the Building Authority were refused on first submission and the approval rate of subsequent resubmissions was 92.7%, Mr Edward HO remarked that some of the rejected plans had to be resubmitted for a number of times before approval could be given. He therefore enquired about the reasons for the hiccups and whether the Administration had any plan to implement appropriate measures to address the problem. DB admitted that no record was separately kept on the number of times of resubmission. He took note of Mr HO's concern about unnecessary workload and waste of time due to rejection of submissions over minor details. In response to the Chairman, he confirmed that most of the resubmissions were approved at the first resubmission, but he undertook to provide detailed statistical breakdown relating to the approval rates for new submission plans and resubmission plans after the meeting for members' further consideration.

7.9 Mr Edward HO also expressed concern about the long time required for processing applications for retrieval of building records which might in some cases hinder the day to day operation of the industry concerned, for example, agency of the estate industry, and enquired about the details of the improvement programme. He also queried why the handling time for general applications and licence-related applications was different.

7.10 DB advised that improvements had been moving fast in BD. As from January 2000, the retrieval time for general applications and licence-related applications had been progressively shortened from 80 days to 21 days and 14 days respectively. With further streamlining of procedures and the planned provision of additional resources, the retrieval time for general applications and licence-related applications could be further shortened to 10 working days and four working days respectively in June this year. He remarked that this would

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be the optimum level attainable for manual retrieval of building plans. As regards the time difference between general applications and licence-related applications, DB advised that the current policy was to give priority to the latter type of cases as they were much more time-critical than requests relating to plan processing. He said that the overall feedback from architects on the efficiency of BD in providing service for retrieval of building plans was favourable.

7.11 Mr Edward HO, however, pointed out that he had all along queried the justifications for using micro-filming rather than electronic imaging as the media for data storage and retrieval. Given the advance of technology, he pointed out that building plans should have been turned into electronic format long ago to facilitate retrieval and to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the process. He therefore criticised that the Administration had in the past failed to respond to the changing technology environment.

7.12 In reply, DB advised that the contract for micro-filming building plans was awarded in 1996. The related work in relation to the building plans between 1970 and 1990 would be completed by April 2000. He explained that at the time the financial proposal was put to the Finance Committee for consideration, micro-filming was considered a reliable and cost-effective archiving technology, and hence, it had been chosen for archiving BD's records of building plans. He however concurred with Mr HO's view that BD should target at instant retrieval in the longer term by archiving all building plans in electronic format. He said that BD had started to store approved building plans in electronic format and would implement a pilot scheme to convert all building plans of a selected district into electronic format in 2000. The Business Services and Promotion Unit of the Financial Secretary's Office would jointly supervise the scheme.

Employment of private consultants

7.13 Noting that in 1999, the Territory Development Department (TDD) had employed private consultants to deliver about 75% of TDD's projects in relation to the provision of land and infrastructure in new towns and urban development areas, and about \$205 million was spent on consultants' fees, Miss Emily LAU enquired about the reasons for the frequent use of consultancy services by TDD and about the situation in other works departments. In connection with the implementation of the Enhanced Productivity Programme

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(EPP) in the public sector, she also enquired how savings could be achieved through the engagement of consultancy services.

7.14 In reply, the Director of Territory Development (DTD) advised that unlike other works departments, TDD usually did not involve in direct supervision of project works. Whilst TDD's in-house staff were responsible for taking forward TDD's projects through statutory procedures, preparing consultancy briefs, vetting consultancy proposals and supervising project consultants, there was also a need to engage private consultants to undertake engineering and feasibility studies, detailed design, preparation of tender documents and subsequent assessment of tenders, construction supervision and contract finalization. As regards the remaining 25% of TDD's projects for which private consultants had not been employed, DTD advised that these projects had been taken up by other works departments through the deployment of the latter's in-house resources. Under the existing arrangement, TDD would consult other works departments to ascertain whether they had the required in-house resources to take up TDD's projects before resorting to the employment of private consultants. He considered that the arrangement had worked well so far.

7.15 As regards the engagement of consultants by other departments, the Director of Planning (D of Plan) advised that a provision of \$37 million had been earmarked for consultancy studies for the Planning Department (PD) in 2000-01. In considering whether consultants should be engaged, PD would consider the availability of in-house resources for the study and/or whether the required expertise and professional knowledge were available within the department. As a matter of principle, PD would deploy in-house resources for its planning studies as far as possible.

7.16 The Director of Lands (D of L) advised that the Lands Department (LD) had contracted out the checking of titles for land acquired by the Government and certain work relating to the West Rail and the Lands Tribunal. Currently, LD was exploring the desirability and feasibility of contracting out more areas of work to enhance cost-effectiveness. He undertook to provide further details of outsourcing by LD after the meeting.

7.17 DB advised that the consultancy services engaged by BD had been set out in the draft Estimates under subhead 700 of Head 82. The estimated expenditure on consultancy services was about \$39 million for 2000-01. In deciding whether private consultants should be employed, BD adopted the

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following criteria -

- a) the project/service concerned was short term;
- b) the project/service required expertise in a certain field or a team of experts in different fields and such expertise was not currently available within the Administration;
- c) the deployment of serving civil servants to deliver the project/service would unduly affect existing services; and
- d) the project/study was directly related to approved policies or committed public services.

7.18 On Miss Emily LAU's concern about productivity enhancement of consultancy services engaged by the Government, the Deputy Secretary for the Treasury(1) (DS(Tsy)1) explained that as the Government awarded consultancy contracts through open tenders, productivity enhancement achieved or planned to be achieved by private consultants would be reflected in their tender prices. She remarked that the overall downward trend of tender prices for public works contracts over the past 12 months was an indication that the private sector had made an effort to control costs and raise productivity to remain competitive under the current economic climate.

7.19 DS(Tsy)1 further advised that whilst the EPP was implemented amongst all Government bureaux and departments, the Administration would ensure that no bureau or department would circumvent the EPP requirements through contracting-out arrangements. Indeed, pursuant to the human resource management strategies under the EPP, bureaux and departments had been advised that consultants should be employed only if committed projects or services could not be absorbed by re-deployment of existing in-house resources. As regards the employment of consultants for the delivery of public works projects, DS(Tsy)1 confirmed that the Administration was usually not in favour of employing permanent civil servants to undertake individual projects.

Land for container backup facilities

7.20 Pointing out that there was acute shortage of land for container vehicle parking and ancillary uses, Mrs Miriam LAU expressed disappointment that the provision of land for container backup facilities was not mentioned at all in the relevant Controlling Officers' reports. She recalled that when legislation

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was enacted in 1991 to facilitate the cleaning up of environmental black spots in the New Territories (NT), the Administration had promised to allocate suitable sites in North West NT for container back-up facilities. An area of 68 hectares in Lok Ma Chau had subsequently been allocated for the purpose but last year, the area was rezoned for nature conservation purposes. She enquired whether alternative suitable sites would be designated for container backup facilities.

7.21 In reply, D of Plan confirmed that having regard to an ecological study on Deep Bay, the Town Planning Board (TPB) had decided to rezone the area originally designated for container backup facilities at San Tin in Lok Ma Chau to a nature conservation zone. He however affirmed that TPB recognised the shortage of land for container back-up facilities and therefore had recently designated a site at Ngau Tam Mei and identified further sites in Peng Che and Ta Kwu Ling for the purpose. He also advised that in planning for the Deep Bay Link Road to connect with the Shenzhen Western Corridor, suitable sites had been reserved for backup uses of the cross-boundary freight trade. D of L added that the Government had tendered a site for container backup facilities in Lok Ma Chau in 1999 but no tender bids had been received on that occasion. At the Chairman's request, D of Plan agreed to provide details on the location and size of the sites designated or identified for container backup facilities.

7.22 Mrs Miriam LAU pointed out that the alternative sites identified/designated for container backup facilities referred to by D of Plan and D of L were either unsuitably located or were not supported by adequate infrastructure facilities. D of Plan acknowledged the need for infrastructure improvement in connection with those alternative sites and advised that relevant infrastructure projects were in the pipeline.

7.23 The Chairman shared Mrs Miriam LAU's concern and urged the Administration to critically examine the provision of suitable sites for container backup facilities to practically meet the operational requirements of the trade, lest part of the efforts on tackling the problem of unauthorized use of land for open storage and vehicle parking would be rendered futile.

Planning studies

7.24 On the proposed study on "Landscape Value Mapping of Hong Kong", D of Plan advised that a provision of \$4.46 million had been earmarked for commissioning the consultancy study. The purpose of the study was to identify spots in the territory with landscape features of preservation value and to draw up relevant planning principles and development guidelines to preserve these landscape features. D of Plan further advised that apart from this study, PD also proposed to commission two other consultancy studies in 2000-01 on "Planning for Pedestrians" and "Formulation of a Master Plan and Implementation Strategy for the Development of an Arts District in the West Kowloon/Tsim Sha Tsui Area" in connection with PD's work on territorial and sub-regional planning. The respective financial provisions for these studies were \$2.92 million and \$4.51 million.